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ABSTRACT

Answers to a questionnaire about the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) are discussed. There are six categories of responses. The first category deals with problems facing the Council as an organization. The second is the Council's relationship with the public, with other organizations, and with the profession. The third category deals with English as a subject. The fourth refers to professional problems. The fifth deals with social change, and the sixth is a miscellany. Several of the respondents felt that the Council must change its structure in order to develop more efficient ways of communicating with the profession and the public. The problem of being more responsive to the needs of affiliates and to the needs of classroom teachers occurred frequently throughout the re lies. One respondent suggested that the "English Journal" create sections on humanities and on media, two recent and important concerns of the English teacher. A few respondents did feel that the annual convention needs overhauling. It is concluded that, in spite of the urgent tone of the responses received, the current moment in Council history is one of great optimism. (CK)

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Priorities Facing the National Council of Teachers of English, 1971

by William A. Jenkins

Introduction

The pleasure which I felt upon being asked by president Bob Bennett to address the former presidents and executive secretaries regarding priorities facing the National Council of Teachers of English soon faded under the glare of a red panic when I realized that I would be addressing many people who are far more versed in Council and professional problems than I ever can be. Recovering my equilibrium, I decided to write to 58 Council leaders asking them to name three priorities to serve as a basis for my remarks today. As good Council members will always do, most of them came through. Forty-six of them responded. They responded in depth. They responded in quantity. They responded out of careful thought. And they responded out of heat.

There was not as much wisdom in my asking them to name three priorities as I had originally thought. Many of the respondents could not restrain and discipline themselves to writing just three priorities. They wrote as many as ten. Most of those who replied were constructive in their answers, not petulant, not lobbying, not riding pet mares. Some of them took my letter of request to meetings of affiliates; others took the letter to teachers' meetings or department heads' meetings, feeling as I did that they needed the counsel of others before they responded.

I suffer, therefore, from the evil of an affluence of ideas. I felt that it was an evil as I sorted and weighed the answers and made arbitrary decisions about which should be included and which should be eliminated. I did not attempt to tabulate the responses, but I will make passing reference to several ideas that occurred frequently in their letters.

You realize that I will distill the responses, but I shall try to keep my own biases at a minimum. Moreover, the import of what the members had to say and the import of the problems which we face will come out not from this paper but from the discussion which follows.

I have grouped the responses into five categories, with the sixth one a miscellaneous grouping. The first category deals with problems facing the Council as an organization. The second is the Council's relationship with the public, with other organizations, and with the profession. The third category deals with English as a subject. The fourth refers to professional problems. The fifth deals with social change. And the sixth, as I said, is a miscellany.

The Council as an Organization

Several of the respondents felt that the Council must change its structure in order to develop more efficient ways of initiating, responding, reacting, and generally communicating with the profession and with the public. Within the Council itself, there has always been the danger that we will misunderstand each other because we hold membership in different sections of the Council, or because we hold varying positions in schools and colleges, or because we

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represent different academic specialties. Differences among us either in role identification or in basic philosophy should not be allowed to diminish our total efforts or our effectiveness as a professional organization. The Structure Committee has wrestled with this problem, but I think it also has to be included among priorities facing the organization.

To the public and to younger members of our profession, perhaps NCTE's image is a bit stuffy, and at least to those at the collegiate level and at the elementary level, the organization appears to be oriented toward the secondary teacher. Perhaps this is natural, for it was with the secondary teacher that the organization began. But one of my respondents said that the Council is developing what she calls middle-age spread. That is, in her view, in the eyes of many members, it has become not so vital, not so personally involving as it ought to be. It is a monolith. Its publication list has grown stale. The statement was not derogative, since this Council member has dedicated a great portion of her professional life to the Council. She bears listening to. Perhaps the Council needs to develop a formula that recognizes the needs and interests of specific groups while it retains the membership and loyalty of these groups to the organization as a whole.

The problem of being more responsive to the needs of affiliates and to classroom teachers occurred frequently throughout the replies. Similarly, the needs of the elementary section were underscored. I may have built a bias into the survey by my choice of respondents, but those who wrote to me included in their letters a great many ideas about the elementary section. For example, it was suggested that every local group, every affiliate, be required to have an elementary section, and that the elementary members share in the affiliate's elected offices. It was suggested that the elementary section needs new publications, including a magazine for early childhood or primary teachers, even if it has to be like The Instructor. It was suggested that the spring institutes next year be on the British Primary School Movement. It was requested that we provide publicity for the National Conference on the Language Arts in the Elementary School next year equal to that given to the spring institutes, which are primarily for secondary people. The range of comments about the elementary section was wide, and there was heat in a number of them.

It was suggested, pejoratively, that NCTE and its affiliates are primarily in the publication business, whereas they should be working more directly with teachers and teacher groups. The Council needs to develop ways other than the printed word to publicize advocated classroom practices, said one correspondent who pointed to films, videotapes, sample lesson plans, packages of materials, audio tapes and records, transparencies, games, and so on, as new ventures for informing the membership of curricular change.

On the other hand, a respondent suggested that English Journal create sections on humanities and on media, two recent but important concerns of the English teacher. The same writer suggested that College Composition and Communication be abolished and that a middle school journal be established. I think the ideas can be summed up by my saying to you that a number of respondents felt that the Council needs to study quite rigorously its publications program.

In another vein, it was pointed out that the Council has done nothing in adult education, that there are three million adult illiterates still in our society, and that it needs to assume leadership in reducing this figure.

Not a significant number, but a few respondents did feel that the annual convention needs overhauling. The question was raised whether the convention can continue to grow in size and still be enjoyable and professionally profitable. In its stead, I was asked, would not regional conventions, replacing both the national and state conventions, be better. The Rocky Mountain Regional Conference and the National Conference on the Language Arts in the Elementary School were cited as two examples of extremely successful ventures smaller than the national convention.

Perhaps the respondent was not aware of the new program embarked on by the Committee on Research, but a strong point was made for a more vigorous promotion of research than the Council has undertaken in the past.

In spite of the unhappiness with our size, one of the more creative responses had to do with a membership drive. This respondent, from Council headquarters, pointed out that there are still just too many people who don't know of the Council's existence and who don't think about us when they have a problem that needs to be solved. His suggestion was that the Council hire a professional organization for the specific purpose of increasing membership, perhaps employing it on a contingency basis. At the same time, he wrote, the organization should assess its membership renewal system. It was his feeling that we are needlessly losing members.

The final point on priority one has to do with professional staff. In the minds of many of my respondents it simply is too small, and we have expected more of those that we have than they can humanly produce. It was pointed out that the Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI) has four professional persons just to answer mail and give information. We have a total of four--soon to be five--persons, not all of whom are on full-time appointment.

If memory serves me well, in the last five years we have added to the responsibilities of the professional staff nine major tasks: the Task Force on Racism and Bias, four spring institutes each year, the National Conference on the Language Arts in the Elementary School, and two Regional Leadership Conferences each year; we have expanded our publication program, expanded the size of our convention, created the Intercommission Committee on Problems of the Schools and the Profession, created the Commission on Reading, and taken on coordination of the five EPDA reading projects. Surely we have been unreasonable in our demands of the professional staff. One suggestion which merits consideration is that we add a person on the national staff to work solely with foundations and to be our representative in Washington. I think that we would not be extravagant were we immediately to double the size of the staff in Urbana.

NCTE Relationships

As a second priority we must give more attention to our relationships with the membership, the public at large, the profession, other professional organizations, and our affiliates. Let me take each of these in turn. The number of people who specifically mentioned affiliate relationships was greater than any other specific item mentioned in the letters I received. Concern about the elementary section was second in frequency. Overall, it was felt that we must strengthen our affiliates and find new and better ways to reach them immediately, effectively, and continuously, and at the same time reach the teacher in the classroom. A specific suggestion was that there be a meeting of affiliate presidents with the Executive Committee at least annually to give affiliates more of a sense of unity and direction.

With regard to the general public, it was pointed out that when the public is uninformed they tend to turn away from us, join Overtaxed Incorporated, and become enemies. A major effort of the Council must be to interpret the role of the organization, the profession, and the subject to the general public.

With regard to the membership, it was felt that somehow the Council must provide more opportunities for leadership. Respondents frequently pointed out that we have to have more leadership and representation from minority groups, from women, from teachers in the classroom, and from young people. Elementary teachers, most of all, would widen the realm of influence which NCTE has.

It was suggested that it should not be possible for people to say that they differ with Urbana, because Urbana should represent all segments of the membership. The question was asked how the Council can create effective leadership in developing thought, definition and direction for such impulses as the humanities. It was asked how the Council could accommodate and cope with dissent, encourage it, and yet not lose members. But there were those, opposing, who decried the fact that the Council does not consolidate its position, nor develop it fully, on new ideas and innovations before it moves on to other things. I had the feeling as I read the letters for the third time that the Council, like a governor or a dean or a college president, has to be a leader and follower at the same time. It's a difficult and perhaps impossible role.

As for working with other organizations, the International Reading Association was mentioned most frequently. There was the feeling that reading, of all of the language arts, should not be isolated or set apart. A new focus on the interrelatedness of the language arts was called for. New ways of working with producers of educational materials must be found because in the future they will be even more influential than they are at present. Finally, it was felt that we must use our influence to effect legislation on teacher certification. If we do not, it will be done by others without regard for our feeling.

English as a Subject

Moving to priority three, the Phoenix-like question "What is English?" was mentioned again and again. Perhaps an outstanding comment was that although we have attempted for years to define it and have not succeeded, we must do so

lest others define it for us. My respondent from Council headquarters said that we must find a center for English as a subject field that allows the discipline to be adaptive and flexible, yet coherent. Without a center, he said, we run the risk of splintering and trivializing English, particularly with interest growing in establishing elective programs and increasing use of nonprint media in the classroom. Unless we have a firm definition of our subject, we are defenseless in the face of both the public and various school administrations, even though they might not attempt to impose a definition on us.

The comments with regard to level of concern range from a new and heavy focus on early childhood education and its relations to the language arts, to English in the university; from the need for preventing the pedagogical fossilization of the young teacher of English, to the need to reform English in the two-year college, which by one respondent's estimate is ten years behind the times. Overall, there was the underlying feeling that we must make a concerted attack on Snobbism in English and define our professional strengths and our professional obligations in terms that are current and viable, but not esoteric.

Many of the respondents were against behavioral objectives, but one quite seriously wrote a sample behavioral objective for the Council.

The hope was expressed that we would disentangle English from hierarchies of class and race. We were asked to undertake a comprehensive review of the curriculum in English, as was done by the Curriculum Commission under Dora V. Smith. We were asked to balance the responsibility of teachers between the social orientation of their students and education in the substantive materials of English.

In summing up priority number three, I quote this inquiry from one of my respondents, who asked: "In a world made up of wars, ghettos, drugs and violence, how can we English teachers illuminate Life and Living in order to make the fact and the process worth preserving?" Implicit in his question may be an ideal definition of English as a subject.

Professional Problems

Those who wrote me decried the current deterioration of self-esteem and incentive permeating the entire teaching profession. As one pointed out, imaginative English teaching is in danger of being deserted by the timid and helpless. She said, "I believe that NCTE has a stake in the curricular revolution of the past decade. It is clear that the Council has an imperative to help teachers who are facing public and administrative imperatives to do something toward improving the subject." And yet, there was the feeling that we should resist very strongly in our teaching an emphasis on thinking, "the cognitive domain," to the exclusion of feeling, "the affective domain."

It was felt that we must resolve the conflict between open schools and more freedom for teachers, on the one hand, and performance contracts, accountability, and behavioral objectives on the other.

The racial crisis in the schools did not go unnoticed. It was pointed out that one way to overcome it, although it will be like chipping at a mountain, may be simply to work steadily and conscientiously at illiteracy. But no matter

what, it was felt that the Council must serve to protect and facilitate freedom, flexibility, and plurality in the development of English programs. I was asked how we can close the gaps in our own ranks between rural-urban, scholar-teacher, theorist-realist, veteran-beginner. I don't know, but I think the question deserves our attention. Similarly, I was asked how we can develop in our profession sales resistence to the increasing number of commercial charlatans who are trying to cash in on the public's intuitionally wise but too often uninformed preoccupation with public education. I was asked, "Who are the curriculum leaders in the public schools?" One answer is that with the abolishing of supervisory positions in so many city school systems' schools, teachers frequently have been left leaderless. It was suggested that the Council attempt to fill the void.

Ed Farrell spoke to the Intercommission Committee in March on pressures on teachers. His remarks were published in the April 1971 English Journal. I won't repeat the list of pressures. I simply call your attention to his very excellent statement. But the pressures were also noted by my respondents, who felt they take various forms and shapes. At times even the leadership of NCTE has been guilty of increasing the pressures on teachers.

A member who wrote sent only one priority. She said: "We must bring the focus back to kids. They have the right to learn for themselves, to read what they wish, to speak in the language they are most comfortable speaking in, to express their thoughts in a variety of presentational forms, and to interpret their receptive language forms based on their own experiences and belief systems." And she closed with this line: "Anything else I would think important would relate to this."

Underlying much of the concern with our subject, of course, is the stereotype of what produces underachievement, a stereotype which has been with us for so long. In a new guise it now says that the school culture is in conflict with youth culture and minority cultures and that these conflicting cultures must be brought into consonance. The curriculum in which the individual is truly the focus, one which is neither trite nor spliced, is the only curriculum suitable for today.

I was asked if we should not again focus on articulation, because prodding in curriculum change must come from the top.

I received a plea for literacy in media other than print. But I like, best of all, the idea expressed in this question: "What can we do as a professional organization to make sure that the practices which both basic and applied research have found to be most effective are in use in English classrooms and those practices which we know are ineffective are withdrawn?" A focus on effective practices may help us define our subject. One lamentable effect of the pressures on teachers has been that the public at large has put down all teachers, all methods, and all public education.

Social Change

The urban crisis with its call for a relevant curriculum, one which pays attention to the needs of minorities and the disadvantaged, was underscored in several of the letters. It was pointed out that until NCTE can put into the hands of teachers something that they can read, for example, on behavioral objectives, which will show them step by step how to write behavioral objectives and how to cope with demands they are facing, we will not be truly serving our constituency. We have to help teachers be more responsive to the problems of our times. We have to listen better to the grass roots. We have to help teachers first to keep abreast of changes, both educational and social, and then help them, if at all possible, to get ahead of the changes or at least direct the changes. Teachers are frantic to come to terms with the changes all about them, and they don't know where to turn. The hope was expressed strongly that they would and could automatically and profitably turn to NCTE.

On the other hand, as an organization we were accused of systematizing and standardizing too early, before the potential in fluid situations is realized. These writers said we were too eager to change quickly and were frequently too responsive. On occasion, it was said, as a Council we have repudiated our own offspring before they have had a chance to mature.

The questions must be asked whether or not there is world enough and time to help teachers come to terms with the educational and social changes which are permeating every aspect of their professional and personal being, and whether or not while meeting this need to cope with change, the Council can refrain from running off in all directions at once, as in a so-called Chinese fire drill.

Miscellaneous

I cannot finish this statement without pointing out that many of our members are aware that communication between the Council and the USOE is almost nonexistent at this time. I don't think the Council should accept the blame for this condition. Rather, I think it is because the U.S. Office of Education no longer listens to the subject matter organizations. But we must do all we can to change this situation.

The collapse of federal support for work in the basic studies and the cutback in federally funded projects led one respondent to suggest that we should have as a major political activity for 1972 the reinstatement of institutes in English, oral language, and preschool language problems. In like fashion, it was suggested that we must have a series of institutes for college teachers of language arts methods courses who, this respondent felt, are very much behind the times. My comment to that is, "Aren't we all?"

Conclusions

In spite of the urgent tone of the responses which I received, and the clarion call for new activities, new viewpoints, new directions, and new efforts, I still view the current moment in Council history as a moment of great optimism. We have dedicated a new headquarters, and I think that is symbolic of the new programs which the Council will develop.

I think it's good that we don't have to look for problems. Our program, although it has not been ordered and although the priorities have not been determined, lies before us. I think the questions we have to wrestle with now are "What do we do first?" and "How do we do it?" I am very happy to be a part of the group which will wrestle with those problems.

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